DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 289 364 FL 017 078

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TITLE Vernacular Dialects in U.S. Schools. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Dec 87
CONTRACT 400-86-0019
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Communication; Cultural Differences; Elementary Secondary Education; English; English Instruction; Equal Education; *Language Attitudes; *Nonstandard Dialects; *Standard Spoken Usage
IDENTIFIERS *ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Children from different backgrounds come to school speaking a wide variety of dialects. Questions concerning the use of dialects in schools have become increasingly complex and controversial in recent years. A central issue is the requirement of a standard dialect in school. Some find it discriminatory, others find it necessary to broaden student opportunity. Dialect differences can affect the quality of education received. Dialect may interfere with the child's acquisition of information and skills, and school personnel and other students may make erroneous assumptions about the vernacular-speaker's capabilities, motivation, and even morality. Two viewpoints on dialects have emerged. The "deficit" position maintains that speakers of vernaculars have a cognitive or language handicap. The "difference" position argues that while languages are different, none is inherently better than another. However, students' language and cultural background can influence their chances of success. Schools might choose to emphasize grammatical usage or writing rather than pronunciation. If a school decides to teach standard English, certain general guidelines concerning content and approach should be followed. Some educators are encouraging active standard and nonstandard dialect study in the curriculum, which can benefit students from all linguistic backgrounds. (MSE)

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ERIC Digest

December 1987

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Washington, D.C.

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

ERIC Digest

Vernacular Dialects in U.S. Schools

Prepared by Donna Christian

December 1987

The Dialect Issue

Children from different backgrounds come to school speaking a wide variety of dialects. Should our schools try to produce students who use a standard dialect? If so, how? If not, how should different dialects be handled in the school setting? What impact does speaking a non–school dialect have? These are among the complex and controversial questions debated through the years, but they have become increasingly prominent in the last two decades. The close relationship between minority and dialect groups makes civil rights an issue along with educational policy.

One central issue in this controversy concerns the requirement of a standard dialect in schools. Some people consider this requirement to be discriminatory, since it places an extra burden on certain students and may deny them the same educational opportunity that others receive. An insistence on standard English forms may hinder the acquisition of other educational skills and make it more difficult for some students to succeed in school.

Others argue that it is a responsibility of the education system to teach a standard dialect to broaden students' base of opportunity. For instance, students who do not develop facility with standard English may find that their employment or educational potential is restricted. A student's chances for success in school and in later life, then, may be related to mastery of standard English forms.

Educational Consequences of Dialect Differences

Dialect differences can affect the quality of education received by some students in at least two ways. One possibility is that a child's dialect may interfere with the acquisition of information and various educational skills such as reading. In a court case in Ann Arbor, MI in 1979, a group of Black parents sued the local school system on behalf of their children, claiming that the students were being denied equal educational opportunity because of their language background (Chambers & Bond, 1983; Farr Whiteman, 1980). Specifically, they maintained that the schools were failing to teach their children to read because they did not take into account the language differences represented by their children's vernacular dialect. The parents won their lawsuit, and the schools were ordered to provide special staff training related to dialects and the teaching of reading. Some educators have also claimed that speaking certain dialects can interfere with learning in other areas, such as mathematics and science (Orr, 1987).

The social consequences of belonging to a different dialect group may be more subtle but are just as important. The attitudes of teachers, school personnel, and other students can have a tremendous impact on the education process. Often, people who hear a vernacular dialect make erroneous assumptions about the speaker's intelligence, motivation, and even morality. Studies have shown that there can be a self-fulfilling prophecy in teachers' beliefs about their students' abilities (Williams, 1976). If an educator underestimates a student's ability because of dialect differences, the student will do less well in school, perhaps as a direct result of the negative expectations. In some cases, students are "tracked" with the so-called slower groups, or even placed in special classes for the mentally handicapped because of their vernacular speech patterns. In the process, the negative opinions may do damage to the student's self-concept.

Difference vs. Deficit

Negative attitudes about speech start with the belief that vernacular dialects are linguistically inferior to standard versions of the language. Two viewpoints on dialects have emerged, often identified as the *deficit* and *difference* positions. The first position maintains that speakers of vernacular dialects have a handicap because of the language system they have acquired—they have a cognitive or language deficit. According to the *difference* position, the language systems of various groups of speakers may differ, but no one system is inherently better than any other. Research evidence that has been collected clearly supports the *difference* position, pointing to the conclusion that variation in language is a natural reflection of cultural and community differences (Labov,1972; Philips, 1972).

Despite linguistic equality among dialects, students' language and cultural backgrounds may influence their chances for success. When children from nonmainstream backgrounds enter school, they are confronted with new ways of viewing the world and new ways of behaving. The uses of language, both oral and written, are centrally involved (Farr & Daniels, 1986) in this "new" culture. Heath's (1983) detailed account of language and culture patterns in two rural working class communities demonstrates clearly the conflict between language and cultural practices in the community and in the school. Language forms such as the use of double negatives as in "They don't have none," as well as patterns of usage such as rules governing when and how to make requests or how to take a turn in a conversation, are among the many aspects of behavior that children may have to adapt to in order to move closer to school expectations.

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Guidelines for Teaching a Standard Dialect

The fact that language differences do not represent linguistic and cognitive deficiencies is an important premise for any education program, whether or not the choice is made to teach standard English. Education priorities should also be carefully considered. Studies of attitudes have shown that use of vernacular grammatical forms is much more negatively viewed than use of distinct pronunciation features. Given this observation, a school might decide that grammatical usage, not pronunciation, should be the focus of oral language instruction. Alternatively, the focus might be set on writing rather than oral language, since the ability to speak a standard variety may not be as crucial for later success as the ability to use standard forms in writing.

If the decision is made to teach standard English at any level, certain general guidelines should be followed (Wolfram & Christian, in press).

•*The teaching of standard English must take into account the importance of the group reference factor.* Speakers who want to participate in a particular social group will typically learn the language of that group, whereas those with no group reference or with antagonistic feelings are less likely to. The utility of standard English must be clear to the learner in terms that are meaningful to an appropriate reference group.

•*The goals of teaching standard English should be clearly recognized in the instructional program.* If the goal is to add a standard variety, for example, teaching might include contexts where the vernacular is more appropriate, giving students the chance to switch between the two. If the goal is to work toward standard forms in writing, but not necessarily in pronunciation, strategies and materials would reflect this decision.

•*The teaching of standard English should be coupled with information on the nature of dialect diversity.* By giving students information about various dialects, including their own, teachers can demonstrate the integrity of the native varieties as language systems. This approach clarifies the relationship between standard and vernacular varieties, underscoring the social basis for evaluation, and strengthens the pragmatic rationale for adding a standard dialect.

•*The teaching of standard English should be based on an understanding of the systematic differences between the standard and vernacular forms.* Both materials and instructional strategies benefit from this information, so that broadly relevant features such as negation are given more prominence than more restricted ones.

•*The dialect of spoken standard English taught should be realistic in terms of the language norms of the community.* The goal of instruction should be the standard variety of the local community, not some formal dialect of English that is not actually used in the area. Regional standards are particularly relevant in the case of pronunciation features.

•*Language instruction should include norms of language use along with standard English forms.* Speaking a standard variety includes the use of particular conversational styles as well as particular language forms. In other words, using a standard language variety in a business telephone conversation is not merely a function of using only standard grammatical and pronunciation features. It also means that a speaker knows other conventions, such as asking the caller to "hold" if an interruption is called for, or performing certain closing routines before hanging up.

The teaching of standard English requires careful thought, ranging from underlying educational philosophy to particular teaching strategies, if it is to be carried out effectively and equitably. This discussion can only scratch the surface.

Dialect Diversity: Opportunity, not Liability

Some educators are encouraging active dialect study in the curriculum, including vernacular and standard varieties. This study can benefit students from all linguistic backgrounds.

At one level, dialect differences may be treated as an interesting topic within language arts study. For example, a unit on vocabulary differences from different parts of the country (where do they say *soda* vs *pop* ? *bag* vs *sack* vs *poke*?) can be both fun and instructive. When treated more comprehensively, dialects can provide the opportunity for students to do empirical research and to develop critical thinking skills: observation, comparison, argumentation. Every school has nearby communities which are linguistically interesting both in themselves and in how they compare with other communities. Students can examine their own speech patterns as well as gather samples from other residents in the area. Such investigations can have the added advantages of enhancing self-awareness and the understanding of cultural diversity. Further, sending students into the community can contribute to the preservation of cultural and oral traditions of the region.

The concept of using dialect diversity and the cultural diversity that accompanies it as a resource in the curriculum presents a viewpoint very different from many traditional approaches. Instead of seeing differences as barriers to be overcome, the differences provide fascinating topics for study.

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This report was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400–86–0019. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.

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